



Silver Spike in Texas

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Transportation has always shaped the destiny of Texas. Systems for moving people and products are more complicated and even more vital today, as highways, airports, rail lines, waterways and pipelines generate our economic growth.

When Texas was a new state, most transportation was by road. But the best indicator of economic growth then was a relatively new invention – the railroad. Fortunes were made, and towns lived or died, depending on where a railroad decided to site a station.

Railroads also brought excitement. The competition to build a coast-to-coast rail line captivated the nation after the Civil War. The first transcontinental link accommodated the northern states. When the final spike was driven in 1869 at Promontory Summit in Utah, it was a signature moment in U.S. history.

Soon thereafter, all eyes turned to Texas, where an epic race was underway to complete the first southern transcontinental link.

Pushing from the west was Collis Huntington, who expanded his Southern Pacific line through southwestern territories and across the Sierra Blanca Pass in mountains southeast of El Paso.

His rival from the east was Jay Gould's Texas and Pacific Railway (T&P). In just 21 months, T&P laid 520 miles of track westward out of Fort Worth "winding through twelve counties inhabited principally by Indians, prairie dogs, and coyotes."

Speed of construction was essential, since the government awarded sections of land for each mile of track laid. The faster they worked, the more property was accumulated by these railroad barons.

By November 1881, the competing railroads were within 10 miles of each other, but neither side was ready to concede the final stretch. "It looked like T&P might get there first, so Huntington sent a wagonload of whiskey to the T&P work gang, camped twenty-five miles east of Van Horn. The drunk lasted a week and a half and gave Southern Pacific the victory," according to Texas Trains.

After Huntington and Gould made a deal, the Handbook of Texas reports "on December 15 Gould drove a silver spike to join the two roads seven miles southeast of Sierra Blanca Mountain. Transcontinental service began the next day."

A decade later, public resentment over railroad business practices led Texas Gov. James Hogg to start regulation via the new Texas Railroad

Commission. The commissioners later supervised buses and trucks, and after oil was discovered, energy pipelines and well production were added.

Some of us can still remember when the Railroad Commission limited monthly oil production in order to prevent an energy glut. Now the problem is precisely the opposite – too little Texas oil and gas is being produced.

Our state is big and most transportation requires energy. Record gas prices are coupled with vastly more expensive fertilizer, food, electricity and other necessities. The result is serious hardship all over the state.

As we transition to alternative sources, producing more traditional energy at home should be our immediate goal. Yet politicians in Washington continue to oppose this obvious answer. This leaves us with higher fuel prices, and it entrusts our economic security to foreign producers, including some hostile to the U.S.

America knows where to find energy. We should start immediately to develop these resources: exploring offshore, extracting oil from western state shale, and opening more development in Alaska.

There are other action items even while we pursue alternative and renewable energy sources – expanding our refinery capacity, expanding nuclear and developing clean coal. All these common-sense solutions have been blocked by political considerations.

America's can-do spirit has always pushed advances in transportation – from railroads, to automobiles and airplanes. As we look for the next transportation innovation, we know it will require energy. If Washington will get out of the way, ideas for producing that energy can move ahead.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column